

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
SEPTEMBER 15, 2009

The following letter was sent to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on September 11, 2009:

The Honorable Hillary Clinton  
Secretary of State  
U.S. Department of State  
Washington DC 20520

Dear Secretary Clinton,

On behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), I urge the United States government to vigorously and promptly oppose Farouk Hosni of Egypt to be director general of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), to actively support an alternative candidate, and, through quiet negotiations and discussions with the capitals of key UNESCO member states, to ask others to do the same.

Mr. Hosni, the longtime Minister of Culture of Egypt, has made some public statements and advocated various policies in the past that clearly compromise his ability to lead an organization dedicated, in the words of the UNESCO Constitution, to promoting "collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for the human rights and fundamental freedoms which are affirmed for the peoples of the world, without distinction of race, sex, language or religion, by the Charter of the United Nations." That Constitution expressly cites "assuring the conservation and protection of the world's inheritance of books" as among UNESCO's functions, yet just last year, Mr. Hosni told the Egyptian parliament that he would personally burn Israeli books if he found them in Egyptian libraries. Despite a subsequent public apology, expressing such sentiment does not bode well for his ability to carry out duties as head of UNESCO. Prominent NGO Reporters Without Borders released a statement recently concluding that Mr. Hosni "has been one of the leading protagonists of government censorship in the Arab Republic of Egypt...constantly seeking to control both press freedom and his fellow citizens' right to freedom of information." In addition, the rights of numerous journalists and bloggers have been violated during Mr. Hosni's tenure, including imposing prison sentences for blasphemy and criticizing the Egyptian government.

Moreover, the government in which Mr. Hosni has served as a Minister for 22 years perpetrates and tolerates serious human rights violations against its own citizens, including widespread abuses of the religious freedom of both members of religious minorities and non-conforming Muslims. The Egyptian government prosecutes in state security court and imprisons persons accused of “unorthodox” Islamic religious beliefs and blaspheming Islam, and has sought an international anti-blasphemy norm by sponsoring resolutions against the so-called “defamation of religions” at the UN. The government also has not taken sufficient steps to halt the repression of and discrimination against religious believers, including indigenous Coptic Orthodox Christians, or, in many cases, to punish those responsible for violence or other severe violations. In addition, the Egyptian government has not responded adequately to combat the widespread and virulent anti-Semitism in the country’s media, including the state-controlled media, or educational system.

Thank you for taking our views into consideration as voting for the UNESCO director general commences next week. We would appreciate any information that your office could share with us as the process goes forward, and Commission staff will contact your staff soon in this regard.

Sincerely,

Leonard A. Leo, Chair